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I Am:

Identity, Maturation, and the Ideal Woman in Bronte's *Villette*

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I Am:

Identity, Maturation, and the Ideal Woman in Brontë's *Villette*

Although many individuals may be familiar with Charlotte Brontë's works—*Jane Eyre* has become, to the consternation of many high school students, somewhat of a literary staple—many others may not be as familiar with *Villette*, Brontë's last and most autobiographical novel. Written after the hugely successful publication of *Jane Eyre*, *Villette* was initially greeted with mixed reviews: critics G.H. Lewes and William Smith Williams treated the novel with polite ambivalence, George Eliot was so influenced by the work that she called her elopement—with the already married Lewes—"a trip to Labassecour," and poet Matthew Arnold detested the work so much that he called the novel a "hideous, undelightful convulsed constricted novel" that is "one of the most utterly disagreeable books I have ever read" (Fraser 434). Despite *Villette*'s varying reactions, the novel overcame several criticisms which deemed the text, according to Anne Mozley of the *Christian Remembrancer* as "a dangerous book" which "must leave mistrust of the author on all thoughtful and scrupulous minds" (Fraser 436). Though Arnold's and Mozley's negative reactions—curiously ironic criticisms from the author of "The Buried Life" and a female Victorian authoress—were certainly detrimental to the book's success, George Eliot's deemed the novel "a still more wonderful book than *Jane Eyre*." Regardless of these mixed reviews, *Villette*'s themes, characters, and underlying premises create a literary work that is exponentially more valuable in the Brontë literary canon than *any* work of *any* Brontë sister. The literary merit of Brontë's novel, which documents one woman's journey towards self-discovery and maturation, is infinitely invaluable; its passion, intensity, and discovery far surpasses the literary fame of *Jane Eyre* and Rochester. *Villette* showcases a

woman's struggles against a tide of Victorian values, and outlines the lonely journey towards maturation and personal fulfillment.

Largely autobiographical, Brontë crafted her novel after several lonely years in Brussels. Stemming from Brontë's increasing dissatisfaction with love, identity, and a repressively patriarchal society, *Villette* becomes, in critic Jane Carlisle's eye, "a journey into a world that is spectral because it is dead, a world that calls into question the stability and substantiability of one's identity" (Carlisle 267). This identity, buried under Victorian prudery, becomes elusive; an unknown variable. As Lucy explores her unlucky fate in a world shaped with Victorian standards, she traces evolution of women—a three-tiered hierarchy—and exposes her society's flawed conception of women. Her literary heroine—a Victorian misfit—moves from stage to stage in a desperate search for an individual identity independent of collective society. Starring a meek schoolmistress as both narrator and character, the story both begins and ends with Lucy Snowe. Lucy is an observer; through her eyes, the reader gains an insight into a world devoid of dynamic female role models. A plain woman, blessed with razor-sharp intellect yet lacking the era's desired feminine beauty, Lucy is as "inoffensive as a shadow," an ideal narrator who carefully records others' faults in her journey towards independence. As an orphan, Lucy is tied to no one, she is essentially "a nobody," a wanderer whose search for identity is hindered by her past-less existence and fueled with deep-rooted passion and intellect. The shadowlike Lucy floats through the text with tireless perseverance, a woman whose deeply imaginative mind was conflicted over patriarchal England's hunger for a woman's silence. As Lucy's parents are whisked away into a watery doom, she must learn to survive in a world where dependency was a social expectation. The young girl is thus forced to declare her independence, taking her first

fledgling steps towards self-discovery. Since Lucy has no known past, she reflects inward and turns her eyes onto her own soul. Stripped of her already ambiguous social status, Lucy's early losses symbolize an escape; a release from rigid gender roles and social convention (Dolin xix). In an attempt to explain Brontë's loaded social commentary, Tim Dolin, in his introduction to *Villette* poses a series of questions that the novel strives to answer:

What happens when a woman is released from the sharply articulated mid-Victorian divisions of private and public social space, and tried to make her way in the world incognito—as a nobody? To what degree is Lucy determined by factors she cannot change? By family, racial or national origins, class and cultural values, physical appearance, personality, and accidents or circumstance? And what impact does her perception of these factors have on her sense of identity, and capacity to succeed and be happy? (Dolin xviii).

The answers to these hypothetical questions form the crux of Brontë's novel, driving Lucy's soul-searching journey towards maturation; a long and lonely road that culminates in her actualized bildungsroman and feminine awakening.

Though Lucy Snowe does not initially realize her curious place in society, her unique nature is apparent to everyone around her. Luann McCracken Fletcher, upon examining *Villette*, notes that Lucy's elusive, ambiguous identity is "victimized by the systematic and almost inevitable misidentification" which plagues her tortured identity (Fletcher 725). Both Paulina Home and Ginevra Fanshawe, for example, are distinctly perplexed with their teacher, and recognize their mentor's status as a unique female prototype. "Who are you, Lucy Snowe?" Ginevra curiously inquires, unable to assign a conventional feminine role to

her young teacher, later referring to her as “peculiar and so mysterious” (Brontë 307, 309). As a member of the refined upper-class, Ginevra is consequently puzzled by Lucy’s role in the universe, uncertain of her teacher’s ambiguous social role. For a woman left penniless in the wake of her parents’ demise, Lucy has risen up the social ladder, evolving from a lowly nursery-governess to a respectable teaching position in Madame Beck’s Pensionnat. Lucy, however, is impervious to Ginevra’s trivial theories. Nonplussed, the schoolteacher teases her student with the truth. “I am a rising character,” Lucy declares with playful truthfulness, “once an old lady’s companion, then a nursery-governess, now a school-teacher” (Brontë 309). Though Lucy is initially upset with being branded a “nobody,” she recognizes that she is at a higher level than her foppish counterpart. “Of what importance was a school-girl’s crude use of the terms nobody and somebody?” she wonders, disappointed with Ginevra’s effort to assign her role in the social continuum. Even John Bretton is confused by Lucy’s ambiguous presence; since she is neither shallow and superficial nor silent and nurturing, the doctor cannot give Lucy a definitive place in traditional femininity. To Graham, Lucy does not appear wholly female; instead, she is an androgynous source of advice and wisdom. Lucy’s intellect far exceeds Dr. John’s, who regards the woman as a peer. He is, however, unwilling to invest in her friendship because of her gender; because Lucy is female, Dr. John is reluctant to trust her as he would a man. “I believe if you had been a boy, Lucy, instead of a girl—my mother’s god-son instead of her god-daughter—we should have been good friends: our opinions would have melted into each other” (Brontë 315). Lucy’s heart is again broken. Though Dr. John rejects her as a potential love interest and an equal, it is the later snub that “thrilled” her heart with unreasonable pain. Graham recognizes Lucy’s multifaceted personality: she is masculine enough to hold a conversation like an equal.

Consequently, Lucy realizes that her foolish feelings towards Dr. John will never take root, though she effectively masks her sadness with her topical indifference. Though smiling encouragingly, Lucy also “hushed a groan,” feeling a deep pang of distress at his rejection and remarking that

I wish he would just let me alone—cease allusion to me. These epithets—these attributes I put from me. His “quiet Lucy Snowe,” his “inoffensive shadow,” I gave him back; not with scorn, but with extreme weariness: theirs was the coldness and pressure of lead; let him overwhelm me with no such weight (Brontë 317).

Tired of being branded as “a nobody,” Lucy begins to realize the dangers of conforming to a rigid social role and her sheer inability to be placed within a social context. Her amorous feelings toward the doctor are beginning to fade as the girl realizes that

I was not disposed to gratify Dr. John: not at all. With a now welcome force, I realized his entire misappreciation of my character and nature. He always wanted to give me a role not mine. Nature and I opposed him. He did not at all guess what I felt: he did not read my eyes, or face, or gestures; though, I doubt not, all spoke (Brontë 318).

Lucy’s mature self is slowly gaining strength, and this realization incites a string of incidents that propel Lucy to her elevated status as an ideal female. She is a woman who has struggled in vain, a heroine who, as Elaine Showalter points out, “was involved in the turbulence of womanly suffering” (Showalter 103).

Though Lucy’s philosophies on love, marriage, and self are unconventional as well as queer, her unorthodox beliefs mirror her creator’s dissatisfaction with her Victorian world’s

emphasis on the ideally feminine and common gender roles. “Lucy Snowe,” Carlisle remarks, “is a mask under which Brontë conceals her identity in order to reveal the unappealing reality of her emotional life and its central figures” (Carlisle 262). Like Brontë, Lucy is a driving force, a woman who has suffered as cruelly and unjustly as the rising authoress. Just as Lucy rebels against her conventionally foppish students, Brontë waged a similar war against a male dominated literary circle. She embraced the unconventional, androgynous George Sand—trousers and all—and deplored Jane Austen’s sensible best-sellers, lashing out against the authoress’ “accurate daguerreotyped portrait of a common-placed face; a carefully-fenced, highly cultivated garden with neat borders and delicate flowers—but no glance of a bright vivid physiognomy—no open country—no fresh air—no blue hill—no bonny beck” (Barker 180). Austen’s work was riddled with Paulina Homes, mild-mannered women who eagerly settled into marriage. Furious that these child-like women could command the respect and admiration of a male-dominated literary community, the frustrated author continued her tirade against this complacent model of femininity. Following a reading Austen’s *Emma*, Brontë accused her contemporary of lacking heart and passion, the spirit of Romantic sentiment. “She ruffles her reader by nothing vehement, disturbs him by nothing profound,” she wrote to Williams, later adding

The passions are perfectly unknown to [Austen]; she rejects even a speaking acquaintance with that stormy Sisterhood; even to the Feelings she vouchsafes no more than an occasional graceful but distant recognition; too frequent converse with them would ruffle the smooth elegance of her progress. Her business is not half so much with the human heart as with the human eyes, mouth, hands, and feet; what sees keenly, speaks aptly, moves flexibly, it



suits her to study, but what throbs fast and full, though hidden, what the blood rushes through, what is the unseen Seat of Life and the sentient target of Death—this Miss Austen ignores; she no more, with her mind's eye, beholds the heart of her race than each man, with bodily vision sees the heart in his heaving breast (Barker 277).

Austen's novels, which depict marriage as convenient business transactions and promoted Victorian gender roles, were best-sellers; their sugary morals absorbed by prudish society.

Consequently disturbed with the quality of nineteenth-century women writers, Brontë strove to create a feminine heroine that encapsulated the true intelligences of real women. Thus, the author traces the evolution of the feminine novel by depicted and discrediting the heroines of each stage in the literary hierarchy, beginning with Ginevra Fanshawe. Ginevra represents the previous generation's silly romance novels, a superficial world where "more writers meant more bad writers" (Mudge 90). Women writers were diminutively referred to as scribblers, their works condemned by their masculine contemporaries. Even poet laureate Robert Southey commented on the ludicrous nature of the authoress, remarking that "Literature cannot be the business of a woman's life: [and] it ought not to be. The more she is engaged in her proper duties, the less leisure she will have for it, even as an accomplishment of recreation" (Flint 171). These so-called "crimes against literature" distracted the woman reader, disengaging her from her proper household chores and allowing her to step into a dangerous world of romance and fantasy (Mudge 125). Bradford Mudge, in *The Whore's Story*, comments on the explosion of women's eighteenth-century writing. "The feminization of the novel thus establishes a series of analogous relationships: Novels

(and their writers and readers) are to literature (and their writers and readers) what Eve was to Adam and what all women are to men” (Mudge 69). Ginevra is Eve the temptress; thus, Brontë provides a reader with a crude example of feminine sexuality and rejects it, allowing the reader recognize the severe character flaws that are associated with Ginevra’s level of womanhood. This dissatisfaction with society is universal; Brontë, through Lucy, speaks for the multitudes of unhappy women living in their mundane spheres of domestic drudgery. “Lucy Snowe is ugly, unloved, and alone,” Forsynth remarks, reiterating the novel’s universality, “What woman at some point in her life could not understand this?” (Forsynth 23). Lucy’s inherent plainness thus separates her from Ginevra’s seductive personality; to over compensate, the girl attempts to conform to the deep-seated Victorian character traits that define Polly Home.

Though Lucy is considerably older than Polly, she learns a great deal about a female’s expected social conduct from the little girl. With a sweet, child-like charm, Paulina Home essentially usurps Lucy’s place in her godmother’s amiable home, winning over both Brettons while treating Lucy like a servant or lady’s maid. This minute countess, who, like Lucy, nurses her mother’s premature passing, is abandoned by her father as he mourns his wife. Armed with a surprisingly haughty air for a small child, Polly condescendingly refers to Lucy as “*the girl*” and often passes by “mute” (Brontë 10). When she speaks to Lucy Snowe, who becomes a makeshift lady’s maid for the Brettons’ guest, she uses a “trenchant manner,” a tone that is “quite different from that she used with Mrs. Bretton, and different again from the one dedicated to Graham” (Brontë 31). Polly has been conditioned at an early age; her sense of social standing and gender roles are inherently apparent in her diminutive figure. Likewise, she uses her social skills to stoically repress her anger, grief,

disappointment, and hurt with her father's absence. Mr. Home—whose wife is described as a Ginevra-like woman whose irresponsible behavior contributed to her early doom—has carefully instilled his society's strict gender roles onto his only daughter. Nearly bursting with joy at her father's first visit, Polly has learned enough from her "hard-featured" father, who Lucy observes, "owned manly self-control" at this pleasant reunion (Brontë 14).

Following suit, Polly refuses to show distress in public, preferring to wait until she is sufficiently alone to release her tiny tears. Only Lucy is privy to this private display of grief, carefully observing her charge with piqued curiosity. Polly's tears are carefully controlled; she lay in the darkness and "wept under restraint, quietly and cautiously" (Brontë 9). Paulina exhibits an enormous amount of control for a small child, containing her excitement and becoming invisible while her father converses with the Brettons. As Mr. Home instructs his daughter to retrieve a handkerchief, Mr. Home acts outwardly indifferent to his only daughter, though he weeps at her departure. Instead of showering the girl with kisses, Mr. Home "seemed not to see or feel her; but bye-and-by, he lifted her to his knee; she nestled against him, and though neither looked at nor spoke to the other for an hour following...both were satisfied" (Brontë 14). Trained to be stoic, the child carefully conceals her emotions, "trembling like a leaf when she took leave, but exercising self-command" (Brontë 34).

Though Paulina Home is antithetical to Lucy, the two share several similar qualities. Both are orphaned and abandoned; Lucy through her parents' watery demise and Paulina after her impractical mother's death. Consequently, both girls self-select to repress their feelings of abandonment, loss, and alienation. Though Polly makes a conscious effort to treat Lucy as a social inferior, the tiny countess recognizes the emotional bonds she shares with Lucy Snowe (Carlisle 280). "Have you no pain just here?" Polly implores Lucy, as the

two girls huddle together in the stillness of the Bretton home, “when you think *you* shall have to leave Graham; for your home is not here?” (Brontë 34). Both girls are surely suffering; trapped, against their wills, in a strange household. Lucy, slightly older and infinitely wiser than her counterpart, is keenly aware of the dangers that will potentially haunt a young woman alone in the world. Holding the child tightly in her arms, Lucy internally poses her own series of questions concerning the child’s welfare. “How will [Polly] get through this world, or battle with this life?” Lucy wonders as she lulls the child to sleep. How will she bear the shocks and humiliations and desolations, which books, and my own reason tell me are prepared for the flesh?” (Brontë 34). Of course, each girl’s response to these questions distinguishes the critical differences between the two. Though Polly *does* share several emotional bonds with Lucy, her actions are in direct conflict with the future school teacher. Gilbert and Gubar, for instance, argue that the gap between Polly and Lucy partly lies in circumstance and chance. Though both girls are commendably spirited and frighteningly repressive, Polly is “Lucy Snowe born under a lucky star,” a woman whose delicate beauty, coupled with Lucy’s penchant for masochistic self-repression, allows her to claim her place as a Victorian ideal. While Lucy’s spirit is an indomitable force, Paulina relinquishes her independence in exchange for social acceptance. Unlike Lucy, who refuses to concede her spirit for a man’s attention, Polly is determined to secure her father’s love through her feminine virtues. Irretrievably tied to Mr. Home, Polly constantly reminds herself to stay strong for her father, unwaveringly deciding to become a model of perfect femininity. Whereas Lucy ignores the household’s masculine influences, Polly babies her father, constantly reminding him of her potential domestic value. She refuses, for instance, to allow her father to pour his own cream, arguing that “I always did it for you at home, papa: nobody

could do it as well, not even your own self” (Brontë 15). Lucy, only a teenager, observes her young charge with a mixture of curiosity and disgust, drawing a great division between their two characters. Though she privately thinks of the girl as a meddlesome “little busy-body,” she also notices that Mr. Home regards Polly behavior as a pleasure; he is “perfectly content to let [Polly] wait on him” and is “wonderfully soothed by her offices” (Brontë 15). This fervent idea of the ideally feminine perverts Polly’s childhood, and Lucy continuously remarks that Polly is no child, but rather a “demure little person” (Brontë 15). Even her father refers to the girl as “fairy-like,” an ethereal sprite (Brontë 428). Her father’s value system has conditioned her to be a docile and submissive little woman, rather than a free-spirited child. These idealized character traits strip Polly of her childhood as she remains in a state of stunted personal growth. Treated as an adult from childhood, her father’s influence retards her personal development. Paulina Mary is in a constant state of childhood; even as an adult, her father fails to recognize her as an adult woman. “It is strange; I had just lost the reckoning of her age,” a nostalgic Mr. Home confides in Lucy on the eve of Graham’s marriage proposal, “I thought of her as twelve—fourteen—an indefinite date; but she seemed a child” (Brontë 426). Silence and submission has served a dual purpose: Polly ages into a gracefully beautiful woman while retaining the purity and virtue of a child. She thus becomes, as Gilbert and Gubar observe, “the paragon of romance—the perfect lady;” a title—and cross—which Polly will bear well into her adult years as Paulina Bretton (Gilbert & Gubar 428).

The growing distinction between both girls’ personalities is, however, revealed in Lucy’s *reactions* to Polly’s actions. Lucy is dissatisfied with her tiny charge, watching—rather than consoling—the girl’s private tears, demonstrating her increasing annoyance at the

virtuous little woman. Lucy observes the girl's behavior with a kind of quiet horror, strongly drawn to her housemate's early domestic behavior. While Lucy performs assorted household chores to earn her keep, Polly single-mindedly focuses on sewing her absentee father a handkerchief. Her brow bent in intense concentration, Lucy's independent spirit watches the child prick herself with a needle; wince; then continue on, tiny drops of blood staining the pure white cloth. As a symbol of domesticity, Polly "bored perseveringly with a needle, that in her fingers seemed almost a skewer, pricking herself ever and anon, marking the cambric with a track of minute red dots; occasionally starting when the perverse weapon—swerving from her control—inflicted a deeper stab than usual; but still silent, diligent, absorbed, womanly" (Brontë 15). The handkerchief, virginally white, is sewn with Polly's blood; in her efforts to please her truant father, the child endures unnecessary pain. Polly repeatedly pricks her finger, an act which suggests a loss of innocence; an initiation in the adult world of feminine silence and suffering. However, six year-old Paulina endures her pain with the strength of an adult woman, desperate to secure her father's love. Reacting to the handkerchief scene, critic Beverly Forsynth comments on the child's unusual behavior, reinforcing the notion that the child's sewing is "analogous to the child's initiation into womanhood, minutes drops of blood on the virginal cambric cloth suggesting the loss of innocence" (Forsynth 20). This "perverse weapon" is a symbol that suggests sacrifice and pain as proper conduct for a young child, reinforcing complicity and domestic sacrifice. Unlike Graham, who frets and frolics as he pleases, Polly must conform to social standards in order to win her father's love. As a result, Polly is pleased to present her father with the bloodstained cloth as a token of her domestic value. Armed with a needle, thimble, and scissors—all symbols of her inescapable future as a wife and mother—Paulina is expected to

perform an adult woman's painful domestic chores, trading her childhood for a needle and thread. She is no longer a mere girl; instead, the petite countess de Bassompierre becomes patriarchal England's ideal little woman. "Paulina is referred to more and more as a fairy, a sprite, or an angel," argues Maureen Peck, commenting on the child's womanly virtues, "We may, therefore, conclude that she plays the role of the good fairy, harbinger of happiness" (Peck 226). Polly is thus in limbo, caught between childhood and womanhood. As a girl, she exhibits the repressive characteristics of an adult woman; as an adult, she shows a childlike innocence that allows her to cling to the "chaste frost" that ultimately wins Graham's affections (Gilbert and Gubar 428). Watching carefully, Lucy Snowe begins to understand the "limits of a role that allows Polly to remain less than an adult" and her own unwillingness to become a woman that will eventually become most comparable to a prized cocker spaniel (Gilbert & Gubar 428). Paulina, one full of spunk and promise, has been domesticated. Both her father and Graham have conditioned her complacency, and she becomes a meek little angel, a picture of perfect silence and pliant submissiveness.

If Polly is viewed as a submissive child, her domesticity increases exponentially as an adult. Polly's frailty lies in her inherent femininity—she is mild-mannered, genteel, and aesthetically pleasing. Unlike the flashy Ginevra Fanshawe, Polly's beauty is quiet; a placid, soothing countenance reminiscent of a fairy or imp. She behaves with admirable decorum in public, charming her suitors with quiet grace and appealing to their sense of nurturing and caring. To men, she appears appealing, attainable, and helpless; to women, she appears as a mild little woman who will adequately care for their sons. Contrasted against Lucy, whose plain exterior and fiery personality warrant unfavorable judgment, Polly is the perfect picture of Victorian women. Nurturing and compassionate, Paulina makes an idea wife; a quiet,

loving figure needing a man's protective touch to uphold her survival. Consequently, her transition from her father's household to Dr. John's bed is relatively smooth; she passes from one home to another, traveling from dependency to dependency. In essence, Mr. Home keeps Polly "pure;" unlike Ginevra Fanshawe, she is untarnished sexual longing. Her father shields her from sexuality, keeping her chaste, pure, and wholly marketable. "She is the only pearl I have," Polly's father sadly remarks, unwilling to pass Polly to Dr. John, "and now others will find out that she is pure and of price, they will covet her" (Brontë 427). Bradford Mudge, explaining the cultural phenomenon of chastity and virtue, offers his perspective on the correlation between chastity and virtue. "Female chastity is female virtue," he remarks, linking the two traits to a collective whole, "the relationship is one of seamless substitution" (Mudge 188). This conditioned Victorian domesticity increases her potential value; contrasted against an earthy Ginevra and an intellectual Lucy Snowe, Paulina becomes more and more of the "good fairy," an ethereal woman with enough beauty to charm her masculine suitors but not enough intellect to threaten their masculinity. Polly is the perfect balance of Victorian characteristics, an ideal woman for a patriarchal society. Once John Bretton conquers the countess with marriage, he is able to reap the rewards of a perfect specimen of a Victorian woman: beauty checked by modesty, virtue, and complacency. Thus, Paulina represents "good" femininity, and the happy pair is united in complacency and social expectation. Polly settles into marriage, passing from her father's careful watch to her husband's eager hands. Unlike Lucy, Polly Home—whose very name signifies comfortable domesticity—is unable and unwilling to earn her own living, choosing to adopt a Victorian veil of submissive silence in exchange for a warm bed. Feeding off this male attention, Polly retains her flawless image as an adult, combining her past childhood innocence with her



newly developed womanly beauty. Similarly, an adult Graham is once again enamored as he reunites with the Homes, quietly watching a grown Polly and again “follow[ing] with his eye the gilded glance of Polly’s thimble, as if it had been some bright moth on the wing, or the golden head of some darting yellow serpent” (Brontë 291). Polly is again showcasing her feminine worth; but this time, a potential husband replaces her father as the primary object of interest. Graham, the “born victor” to Polly’s “lucky star,” will ultimately form a perfect Victorian match, and the two will settle into their conventional roles as husband and wife (Carlisle 285).

Due to their unique though similar circumstances, both Lucy and Polly have no other option than to remain in the Bretton household. Their reactions to their environment, however, differ greatly. While Lucy has lost both parents *and* any kind of financial support, Polly is still visited and financed by her remaining parent. Polly gambols about the house like an imp, running imaginary chores and treating Lucy Snowe with blatant indifference. More surprisingly, however, is how she conducts herself around Mrs. Bretton. As head of the household, Mrs. Bretton controls the family finances; however, Polly shows a considerable preference towards Graham. She does not recognize Mrs. Bretton as the family matriarch and chooses to coddle Graham instead. Never once does Polly help her godmother with household chores, nor offer any signs of affection. This peculiar behavior, however, is expected: Mrs. Bretton is little Polly’s only rival, the one person standing between the diminutive girl and the auburn-haired teenager. The girl, whose beloved father has temporarily forsaken her, is unwilling to allow her only competitor to gain an unfair advantage over a potential suitor. Similarly, Polly exhibits a disturbing ability to recognize, even at a young age, that the plain, unobtrusive Lucy Snowe can never challenge her

feminine value. A mere child can recognize these deep-seated social values, and consequently conform to their expected roles as early as six years-old. Polly's role as a model of Victorian virtue places her on an infinitely higher level than flighty Ginevra Fanshawe. Though conditioned to repress unseemly emotions and quietly endure physical and mental anguish, Polly still harbors major character flaws. For example, she feels incomplete without a father figure in her life and is incapable of surviving, as Lucy has, on sheer circumstance and hard labor. Miserable in her father's absence, the young Polly's attention shifts from her father to Graham: the only masculine figure in the house. She becomes sickeningly servile, craves his praises and quickly becomes the boy's shadow. Lucy observes the child's "parasitic attachments" with interest; to please the fickle boy, Polly imitates traditional "womanly" duties, volunteering to serve the boy tea and filching extra treats for her favorite housemate (Gilbert & Gubar 404). Graham, however, is delighted, offering invaluable trinkets in exchange for her domestic service. He applauds her quiet domesticity and rewards her with lavish praise. She is the ideal woman; docile and willing, uncomplainingly passive, submissive, and infinitely obedient, the idolized "angel in the house." Thus the miniature countess becomes an impossible standard, a mark of the feminine ideal.

Though both Polly and Dr. John appear as amiable figures, their true intentions are absconded with their own virtue. While Dr. John is complimented and praised by his patients, it is important to note that his patients are all female. Attracted to a mane of golden hair, good looks, and a steady, respectable vocation, several young women—including Madame Beck—fall in love with the attractive doctor. He flirts, pets, and cuddles, essentially leading these women on to feed his own ego. Despite an affable nature, Dr. John

is shallow and superficial. He is first drawn to Ginevra because of her looks, blissfully ignorant of her emotional abuse, and cruelly toys with both Lucy's and Madame Beck's affections. The young doctor also has an oedipal complex: for instance, he initially overlooks Ginevra's superficiality, but draws the line when the flighty girl mocks his mother. "Her beauty retained its fascination: three days—three hours ago, I was very much her slave," the doctor informs Lucy, later adding that "for one luckless sneer, I should yet be the humblest of her servants" (Brontë 218). The doctor cannot control Ginevra's unpredictable emotions; without that power of restraint, he can no longer love her. Determined to marry a woman whose charming graces could please his affable mother, Graham feels a comfortable sense of power over Polly, saving her from distress by caring for a sprained ankle. He is attracted to the pretty countess because her placid mannerisms are similar to the amiable Mrs. Bretton; Ginevra's social spirit and Lucy's intellectual superiority are too much for the doctor to handle. Graham cannot control Ginevra; no matter what gifts he may buy or promises he might make, coquettish Ginevra will still flirt with other, richer men. She lacks Mrs. Bretton's friendly, charitable nature and Graham finally, though painfully, acknowledges that his former muse is no longer "so spotless, so good, [and] so unspeakably beautiful," but is in actuality "neither a pure angel nor a pure-minded woman" (Brontë 125, 219). Though superficially shallow, Ginevra's beauty is incapable of being harnessed. Likewise, Lucy Snowe's fierce spirit prohibits him from shifting their friendship into love: she is too independent, too intelligent for him to control.

As an unconventional woman, Lucy piques the young doctor's curiosity and inspires a brief flirtation. Though Lucy-as-narrator views her foolish affections as a necessary step towards her personal development, Dr. John treats Lucy-as-character poorly. Lucy is

overjoyed when the handsome doctor takes her to the theatre and museums, and Dr. John instills a sense of hope for a young girl longing for romance. His ulterior motives, however, are cruel. He essentially uses her, pressing her for information about Ginevra's other lovers, mocking her intellect, and soliciting advice about his current love life. He realizes that she is enamored by his outward kindness and charisma; in turn, Graham tantalizes Lucy with false hints of feeling. In the novel's most emotionally charged scene, the reader finds Lucy sobbing over stolen lost letter, her heart breaking as she realizes that she has lost a piece of her beloved doctor. She expresses her heartbreak to Graham who, in a display of carelessness, attributes her anguish to mental hysteria and threatens to cease writing her beloved letters. Just as a teenage Graham intimidates Polly by threatening to cut up a favorite picture, the grown doctor uses the same threatening method in an attempt to control Lucy Snowe. "I will take away the single epistle," he informs his sobbing god-sister, "being mine, I think I have the right to reclaim it" (Brontë 248). John effectively acknowledges his masculine power to dispense and withdraw love at his every whim; he can offer scraps of flirtation and draw them back when he pleases. Always conscious of nuances in others' personalities, Lucy recognizes "a new sort of smile playing about his lips...a new sort of light sparkling in his eyes: not hostile, but not reassuring" (Brontë 248). Thus Lucy recognizes glimmers of a defective nature, a heart incapable of loving a woman without beauty. Carlisle, however, recognizes this realization as an ironic revelation; Graham falls victim to loving "someone both unattainable and worthless," paralleling Lucy's *own* schoolgirl crush on the attractive physician (Carlisle 246).

Polly and Graham, however, make a natural pair. In fact, Polly is the culmination of a childhood pet project, essentially a model conquest. As a teenager, John treats Polly with

sadistic cruelty disguised as love, endeavoring to “seduce her attentions” with colorful trinkets (Brontë 19). His playful teasing, for example, aims to control the girl and command her attention. Graham uses threats to force Polly’s complicity, enticing her with an attractive picture of a puppy and toying with her fragile dignity. Though Polly’s willpower is initially strong enough to resist such a tempting offer, John uses intimidation to weaken the girl’s resolve. As punishment for refusing the gift, he threatens to “cut it into strips for lighting the taper” and ignores her horrified protest. Both Mrs. Bretton and Mr. Home watch in amusement as the boy brandishes a pair of scissors and teases the distraught girl. “Here goes,” he declares, preparing to tear apart the prized picture, “Right through Fido’s head, and splitting little Harry’s nose” (Brontë 20). John ignores Lucy and tempts Paulina, appealing to her feminine need for a male figure. Though jesting, Graham buys Polly’s love with trinkets and toys, forcing her dependency. He usurps her love from her father, making curiously ominous threats to the bereaved girl and remarking, with borderline cruelty, that “I am going to become a favorite, preferred over papa soon, I dare say” (Brontë 17). His threats are actualized in Polly’s adult years; his marriage proposal thus “robs” Mr. Home of his “beloved jewel.” As Lucy watches with interest, Graham commands Polly’s interest when he chooses, but demands her silence in the presence of others. After his schoolboy friends visit the Bretton household, John becomes irritable at the child’s intrusive presence and punishes her with a cold shoulder. Confused, angry, and upset, Graham’s social snub reinforces a valuable lesson from her father: the silent, unobtrusive female is the desirable means to win a man’s love and respect.

These conventional values represent the stifling social restrictions Victorianism placed on women; an attitude which would plague Lucy Snowe’s path towards maturation.

Victorian realism, which effectively suppressed the imagination and promoted reasonability and rationality, is in direct conflict with Lucy's imaginative spirit and free-thinking ideals. Lucy rebels against convention, dabbling in art, theatre, and speaking her mind when the occasion arises. She argues with her male peers, holds her own beliefs, and, consequently, struggles with her society's emphasis on submissiveness and silence. Unlike the lackluster—albeit aesthetically pleasing Paulina—Lucy feels as if her personal identity is in conflict with her surroundings. The split between her ingenious spirit and her severe social contradiction throws the girl into the throes of uncertainty. Witness to Ginevra's showy displays of passion and Polly's homely complacency, Lucy's primary struggles are a consequence of her conflicted mind (reason) and heart (imagination). After falling half in love with pseudo-hero Graham Bretton, Lucy vacillates between her fiery heart and icy mind, struggling to unite the two sides of her dynamic personality. Chapter XXI, aptly entitles "Reaction," personifies Lucy's loathed reason, Paulina's driving force. "This hag, this Reason, would *not* let me look up, or smile, or hope," Lucy argues, "she could not rest unless I were altogether crushed, cowed, broken-in, broken-in, and broken-down" (Brontë 229). For Lucy, whose heart hopes against all hope that the handsome Dr. John will write over his brief absence, reason overpowers imagination, a cruel mother-figure whose constant chastising breaks her spirit. Reason, with her "withered hand" and "chill blue lips" stifles Lucy's imaginative spirit, depicted as

...vindictive as a devil: for me, she was always envenomed as a step-mother.

If I had not obeyed her it has been chiefly the obedience of fear, not of love.

Long ago I should have died of her ill-usage: her stint, her chill, her barren

board, her icy bed, her savage, ceaseless blows; but for that kinder power who

holds my secret and worn allegiance. Often has Reason turned me out by the night, in mid-winter, on cold snow, flinging for sustenance the gnawed bone dogs had forsaken (Brontë 229).

In the spirit of Polly Home, Lucy—in typical Victorian fashion—punishes herself for her hidden passions. Reason, the spirit of Victorian England, hinders Lucy’s maturation. For a blissful moment, the girl lapses into a deep sleep, dreaming of fruitful harvests and ripe summer imagery, “a spirit, softer and better than Human Reason” brings peace; “a sphere of air borrowed of eternal summer” (Brontë 230). As Lucy slips into unconsciousness, imagination’s gentle presence quiets the troubled woman’s thoughts, providing temporary relief. When the schoolmistress awakens, she is again confronted by Reason’s draconian “guard;” her conscious self greeted with “the cold of raw dawn” and “ice-cold” water (Brontë 230). Lucy, still in the initial stages of her soul-searching efforts, longs for a union between the two emotions. Her oscillation between Ginevra’s Romantic world and Polly’s Victorian reality causes the tormented girl pain and anguish; her silent internal struggles are self-inflicted, and this unhealthy repression causes a borderline schizophrenia.

Lucy Snowe’s disquieted self mirrors her creator’s own ambivalence. Brontë, following *Jane Eyre*’s successful 1847 publication, grappled with her lingering attraction of the Romantic imagination. “I restrained imagination, eschewed romance, repressed excitement: over-bright colouring too I avoided, and sought to produce something which should be soft, grave and true” Charlotte informs Lewes before confronting him with a series of dubious questions:

Imagination is a strong, restless faculty which claims to be heard and exercised, are we to be quite deaf to her cry and insensate to her struggles?

When she shews us bright pictures are we never to look are we never to look at them and try to reproduce them?—and when she is eloquent and speaks rapidly and urgently in our ear are we not to write to her dictation? (Barker 169).

Lucy and her creator both struggle with the perception of nineteenth century women within their restrictive society. Exemplifying Victorian women's increasing frustrations, Brontë felt disembodied in such a restrictive social sphere. Both Lucy and Charlotte struggle with their imaginative spirits and both rise above their restrictions—Charlotte as a novelist, and Lucy as the head of her own school. As a result, Lucy Snowe is more than a fictional character; instead, she becomes a universal model of Brontë's desired woman.

Ginevra Fanshawe, on the other hand, represents another, less desirable side of the feminine. Ginevra constitutes the lowest run on a hierarchal scale; she is beautiful, yet base and low. Lucy's Romantic imagination, however, is attracted to Ginevra's subtle power. Her beauty is breathtaking, and the girl effectively brings several men to their knees with her outward beauty. She is reminiscent of Romantic fantasy, a woman torn from the pages of Byronic poems and rich, ethereal beauty. She is Dr. John's "tormentor," a woman Lucy initially believes is "an unprincipled though pretty little French grisette, airy, fickle, dressy, vain, and mercenary" (Brontë 103). Coy and enticing, Ginevra embodies self-indulgence and freedom, two traits which are attractive to colorless Lucy Snowe. Ginevra, however, is a static character riddled with character flaws and vanity. Though Lucy's restless imagination admires Ginevra's physical beauty and sexual freedom, she is both amused and disgusted with her intellectual deficiency and flippant attitude towards marriage. "By-and-by we are to marry—rather elderly gentlemen, I suppose, with cash," she glibly informs a shocked Lucy,



“papa and mama manage that” (Brontë 103). She vocalizes her views towards marriage; Ginevra is a gold-digger, a woman who knows her own aesthetic worth and is determined to snare the best man to suit her means. To the intellectual, self-sufficient Lucy Snowe, Ginevra’s needs are childishly base, her personality under developed.

Despite an internal longing for love, Lucy Snowe is well aware of her physical handicap. Unable to be charm the masses like coquettish Ginevra Fanshawe, Lucy represses her emotions as heartily as Polly Home. Unlike Polly, however, Lucy’s heart begins to rebel over these cruel social constraints. Her mind is never stagnant; instead, she constantly question and explores her own soul. Lucy is thus in a state of binary opposition, pulled against two conflicting forces. It is only when she can find the proper balance between these two oscillating forces that she can find true happiness. Similarly, unlike Polly and Ginevra, Lucy lacks the resources to give her a stable foothold in her patriarchal world. Gilbert and Gubar depict Lucy as “from first to last a woman *without*—outside society, without parents or friends, without physical or mental attractions, without money or confidence or health” (Gilbert & Gubar 400). She is, to the greater society, worthless—incapable of inspiring love. Her intellect, however, is dangerous, a defining characteristic which sets her apart from docile Polly Home. Lucy is a free-thinker, a woman in a constant state of self-reflection and search for understanding. Like Ginevra, Polly seeks only to understand her role in the greater society; Lucy constantly seeks self-fulfillment. In accordance with Victorian society, both women effectively repress their true personalities, but Polly’s personal development plateaus while Lucy’s transcends. Lucy develops a new identity, rebelling against convention and defying assigned gender roles. While Polly succumbs to her social expectations, Lucy rises above them; indeed, she is a “rising character,” a steadfast spirit

who refuses domination (Brontë 309). She will not restrict herself to Paulina's servile submission or Ginevra's ignoble pride. Instead, the former lady's maid defies collective stereotypes and cultivates a new world view independent of her society. "The world is very right in its view;" Lucy informs the reader, "yet believe also that I am not wrong in mine" (Brontë 309). Though Lucy accepts that fact that her society's conventional beliefs may prove unchangeable, she also realizes her own development as an unorthodox woman with radical views.

Nevertheless, Lucy Snowe's world view is distinctly radical. Lucy never mentions a desire to get married; a peculiarity markedly absent from the novel's other female characters. Even Madame Beck, who futilely attempts to thwart her English schoolmistress's potential happiness, "did not love, but she wanted to marry" (Brontë 447). Polly stumbles into marriage with childlike simplicity and Ginevra, in her typical fashion, ensnares a husband for material gain. Only Lucy, whose penchant for solitude grows stronger each day, resists the urge to marry for the sole purpose of settling into domestic bliss. This ambivalence towards marriage, however, is atypical for her society. In a world where women were expected to marry, Lucy is a misfit, and outcast who would rather develop an individual identity than combine it with another. Lucy is not meant for marriage—her spirit is too fiery, too independent—and her distress stems from the idea of marriage as an expected stage in feminine development. She is thus "haunted" by a mysterious apparition; a ghostly nun that sends the girl into fits of mental hysteria. It is no coincidence that Lucy witnesses the nun in the same place that she finds the buried letter; should she continue her path of repression and masochistic self-punishment, she will be faced with a potential fate inside the convent walls. Thus, Victorian society offers Lucy two options: a future as a docile housewife, or a

restrictive lifetime of religious confinement. The nun becomes an ominous apparition, a ghostly prophesy which Gilbert and Gubar describe as

...not only a projection of Lucy's desire to submit in silence, to accept confinement, to dress in shadowy black, to conceal her face, to desexualize herself; the nun's way is also symbolic for Lucy of the only socially acceptable life available to women—a life of service, self-abnegation, and chastity (Gilbert & Gubar 426).

This gothic apparition interrupts a realist novel, creating a sense of double genre and ambiguity, mirroring both Lucy's ambivalence and her troublesome inability to fit into a distinct social mold (Warhol 867). . Indeed, this seemingly out of place occurrence allows Lucy to confront her fear. "The phantom nun is no mere creaking contrivance," argues Maureen Peck, "but an important part of the psychological truth of the novel" (Peck 224).

Peck's "truth," however, is complex. Lucy discovers that the nun is firmly rooted in reality, a mere schoolgirl prank. Once Lucy realizes that the nun is a hoax, rather than a supernatural apparition, she knows that she can transcend this typical portrait of a woman and control her own identity—an impending stint at the nunnery is no longer an ultimate reality. Lucy can reject a lifetime of chastity and self-repression by creating her own identity; a new reality independent of either the convent or marriage. Thus Lucy moves closer to her awakening. Her romance with M. Paul Emmanuel is a catalyst for self-discovery; when she embraces his love, she realizes that she can be loved without Ginevra's lust and Polly's syrupy submission. Her relationship with M. Paul is the union of two wholly compatible personalities and Paul and Lucy gaze on each other with Joycean awareness. M. Paul accepts Lucy, faults and all, allowing the schoolteacher to accept her unique identity

and be satisfied (Forsyth 23). Lucy manages to unite love with her desires to remain unmarried: Paul Emmanuel is “lost” at sea, returned to the turbulent waters of Lucy’s past. Though her sweetheart’s passing will be undoubtedly mourned, his death frees her from marriage. The cycle is consequently completed; Lucy is once again alone, but this time with soul whose “always fettered wings” have finally learned to fly. She has regained her ability to both love and be loved, transcending the idea of the prudish Victorian woman and becoming a new reality, a model for a new feminine identity. Therefore, it is of no surprise that Lucy’s newly found emotional and physical independence is a coveted treasure. “M. Emmanuel was away three years,” a mature Lucy informs her audience, “Reader, they were the happiest three years of my life” (Brontë 493). Armed with the knowledge that she too is capable of being loved, Lucy is free to head her own school, and educate her pupils under own rule.

As Lucy claims her place on the highest tier of womanhood, she embraces the unconventional and proclaims her feminine independence. Compared to her two inferiors—Ginevra Fanshawe and Paulina Home—Lucy emerges as a strong, dynamic female figure. In a world where unmarried women either became crotchety spinsters—a la Miss Marchmont and Madame Beck—or were confined in a stone-walled convent—Justine Marie—Lucy finally establishes a sense of identity. She has transcended both Ginevra’s base, earthy reign and Polly’s sickeningly submissive domesticity. Lucy is actualized, transcending the idea of the prudish Victorian woman and becoming a new reality, a model for a new feminine identity. Brontë rebels against a world where women dreamed of either marriage or the convent walls. Restrictive, pedantic, and exceedingly patriarchal, the idealized nineteenth-century woman was little more than a child; a pretty toy petted by a loving husband. Lucy

Snowe, however, transcends this collective identity, and stands alone as a premier example of the new woman, an independent female whose quiet strength and subtle fire far eclipses Jane Eyre and her marriage to Edward Rochester. Throughout *Villette*, Lucy Snowe transcends her Victorian reality, becoming a new model of feminine spirit and independence. Woman is redefined and revalued as Lucy, contrasted against Paulina Home and Ginevra Fanshawe, celebrates her femininity and defies conventional Victorian values, culminating in an explosive declaration of freedom and autonomy; a tale that earns a place in literary history as one of “the most moving and terrifying accounts of female deprivation ever written” (Gilbert & Gubar 400).

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